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ABSTRACT

This study of the impact of television on the moods of adults examined responses to television in the subjects' natural habitats and compared mood states while watching television to moods associated with other daily activities. Data were gathered by the recently developed method of experiential sampling in which automatic paging devices signal subjects at random intervals; subjects indicated their activity, mood state, and other data in response to each of 45 electronic radio signals over a period of one week. In all, 104 adult workers aged 18-63 completed self-report forms in response to these signals, took a personality test, and were interviewed by a team of researchers. The results indicated that TV watching in adults is an unchallenging and relaxing experience. Higher amounts of TV viewing were significantly correlated with negative mood states such as hostility and suspicion in non-television activities. Practical applications of these and other findings are considered in light of the television viewing habits of older adults. (Author/RAO)

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MOOD STATES AND TELEVISION VIEWING IN ADULTS

by

Robert W. Kubey

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MOOD STATES AND TELEVISION VIEWING IN ADULTS

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Research concerning the impact of television on the moods of adults has only recently begun. This study examined responses to television in the subjects' natural habitats. In addition, mood states while watching television were compared for the first time to moods associated with other daily activities. To accomplish this, the research employed the recently developed method of experiential sampling wherein automatic paging devices signal subjects at random intervals. Subjects indicated their activity, mood state, and other data in response to each of 45 electronic radio signals over a period of one week. In all, 104 adult workers aged 18-63 were followed in this manner and interviewed by a team of researchers. The results confirmed that TV watching in adults is an unchallenging and relaxing experience. Higher amounts of TV viewing were significantly correlated with negative mood states such as hostility and suspicion in non-television activities. Personality characteristics of the heavy viewer are also examined. Practical applications of these and other findings are considered in light of the television viewing habits of older adults.

Probably no technological development of the latter half of this century has sparked more controversy and more profoundly influenced the daily lives of Americans than that of television. With 121 million television sets in the country and the average family devoting upwards of 44 hours each week to its content, television's presence is nearly ubiquitous. It is clear that no other mass medium rivals television as our culture's dominant symbol

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I wish to thank Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Ron Graef for making the data used in this research available and for providing assistance with aspects of the data analysis.
This paper is in abbreviated and revised form due to the constraints of oral presentation. It is hoped that it will soon appear in publication.

producing apparatus. Television viewing has been called by one author: "The first undertaking in mass behavior modification by coast-to-coast and intercontinental electronic hook-up" (Goldsen, 1977). Another observer (Comer, 1977) has argued, for example, that people now turn to television to learn how to cope with their emotions and that traditional institutions such as the church, family, and school have become less influential in teaching and assisting people to effectively deal with their problems. For children, a number of researchers believe that TV has become the principal socializing agent (Gerbner, 1977). If it is the case that profound socializing phenomena such as these are occurring as a result of TV viewing, it is imperative that we better understand what actually happens to a person when television is watched.

I wish, then, to present to you today some preliminary findings from research I have recently conducted. The discussion will cover both the results of my endeavors, which I believe are in the spirit of basic television research, as well as the implications of these results for adults and the elderly.

Nearly all authors and researchers concerned with television have assumed, with virtually no empirical evidence as support, that television watching is a passive, uninvolving and generally boring experience. A minority of observers have, on the other hand, hypothesized that television's content subjects the viewer to harmful levels of stress (Caprio, 1976; McKenzie, 1976; Rosenbaum, 1976) and that TV serves as an irritant to already existing tensions within the family (Rosenblatt & Cunningham, 1976).

Except for controlled laboratory studies, television researchers have yet to thoroughly examine the very basic questions of how people feel while watching TV in their homes or how the experience of viewing contrasts with the variety

of other activities which engage people on a daily basis. To answer such questions, I utilized a body of data collected via a recently developed method which fulfilled the requirement of tapping mood states in a relatively unobtrusive manner while people were actually involved in their normal course of activities (Csikszentmihalyi, Larson, & Prescott, 1977).

Method

Procedure

The data were obtained from a sample of 104 adult workers, each of whom filled out self-report forms at random times during a period of one week. The scheduling of these self-reports was controlled by one-way radio communication. Each subject carried a pocket-sized electronic paging device, a beeper, which was activated by radio signals emitted from a transmitting tower with a 50 mile transmission radius. The signals caused the beepers to make a series of audible "beeps" which served as the stimulus for subjects to complete the self-report form. On average, each subject was signalled 45 times during the waking hours only and nearly 4,800 records were thus collected.

The Sample

The sample consisted of full-time male and female employees from five companies in the Chicago area who volunteered for the study without compensation. Sixty-three percent of the subjects were female, 54% white collar, 30% single and never married, 80% white, and 43% over 35 years of age with an age range of 18-63 years. The average annual earned income was approximately $12,000 and few subjects earned a great deal less or more than this figure. Ninety percent of subjects had completed high school and another 90% worked either assembly line jobs or were clerical secretaries. The others were composed of supervisors, buyers, and engineers. The data were collected by

researchers other than I., primarily for the purpose of studying workers, hence the sample. The research on television utilized this already existing sample which does not serve as a representative corss-section of all TV viewers, nor did the existing data indicate which TV programs were being watched when subjects were signalled. Nonetheless, the sample and data do provide adequate information so as to make this study relevant to the research questions posed.

The Self-Report Form

Each subject was interviewed, given a personality test (Maddi, Kobasa, & Hoover, 1976), and provided with a separate self-report form to complete in response to each beep. Activities which subjects reported doing were later coded into a limited number of categories of environments and activities. A group of 13 semantic differential items asked subjects to rate their mood and physical state at the moment signalled.[1] Another group of items was designed to measure the quality of the subject's interaction with the environment: whether the subject felt challenged by the activity, whether he was concentrating, whether he wanted to do what he was doing, and whether he was in control of his actions.

Great care was taken in the data analysis to statistically remove any potential influences of group trends which might confound the results. Similarly, individual means were used so that no one subject might have an undue influence on any of the results.

1. Moods and physical states: hostile-friendly, alert-drowsy, happy-sad, tense-relaxed, suspicious-trusting, irritable-cheerful, strong-weak, active-passive, lonely-sociable, creative-dull, resentful-satisfied, free-constrained, excited-bored.

Results and Discussion

Our subjects spent an estimated average of 1.5 hours watching television during the 14 hours of each day when beepers were activated and no other leisure activity involved as much time. Television watching was also found to be an activity which people more frequently reported "wanting to do" than any of 15 other activities studied, except for "reading" and "sports and games." Thus, television viewing can be thought of as among the most freely chosen activities in which people become involved.

The Viewing Experience

When studying mood states, I compared TV watching to seven other major types of activity: work, housework, public leisure activities, home leisure activities, socializing, eating, and what were called "idling" activities such as waiting in line or staring out a window. Television watching was reported by our subjects as the most "relaxing" and least "challenging" of these activities. The degree to which people felt "relaxed," rather than "tense," suggests that TV watching is not the stress producing experience that some have theorized. Furthermore, the subjects reported feeling more "passive," "dull," "bored," "drowsy," and "weak" while watching TV than any other activity except for when they were completely unoccupied or idling. Nearly all of these comparisons of difference between TV watching and the other major activities were highly significant on a statistical basis--most were well beyond the $p = .005$ level (t-test, two-tails).

It appears, then, that most people feel very relaxed and passive while watching television and may choose to do it so readily because the "work" of attention required in many other daily activities (work, driving, cooking, reading) is not necessary for the viewing of television. In other words,

the constantly moving television image makes hours of viewing easy in contrast to prolonged involvement in other activities where the object of attention is more static. The medium of television allows the viewer to relax as an endless parade of images pass, almost like a dream, before the viewer's eyes. Moreover, it is likely that people often watch TV because they already feel or wish to feel relaxed and the nature of the viewing experience tends to sponsor such feelings.

Heavy Viewing

I will now discuss relationships between the amounts of viewing that people engage in and a host of other phenomena. First, the personality test given to subjects indicated that people who watched greater amounts of television tended to score high on a personality characteristic called "adventurousness" ($r = .29$, $p < .01$, two-tails). People who score high on this characteristic, although not necessarily behaviorally adventurous themselves, tend to feel alienated from the more commonplace aspects of life and are fascinated by the unordinary. Certainly, television offers an incredible array of content which depicts people in relatively uncommon circumstances of adventure, violence, and action. The heavier viewer may be drawn to television because his life lacks such adventure or it may be that heavy television use results in some depreciation of the worth of more common and traditional enterprises. It is suspected that both phenomena operate and reinforce one another. We can conclude, however, that people with a high predisposition to thoughts, wishes, and fantasies of exciting involvement, and who are alienated from many of the usual offerings of life, tend to watch more television.

People who watched more television also reported "concentrating" somewhat less on average during the day. This slight drop in the overall level of

concentration may lend support to those social critics who contend that heavy exposure to television makes it difficult for people to concentrate on activities and stimuli which are more challenging that the TV screen.

While in the act of viewing itself, it is of considerable interest to learn that people who watched more television felt significantly less in "control of their actions" ($r = -.27$, $p < .01$)[2], greater "passivity" ($r = -.21$, $p < .05$), and more "weakness" ($r = -.19$, $p < .10$) than light viewers. One might think that TV watching would be experienced more positively by persons who more frequently choose to view. However, heavier viewers are probably less discriminating and exert less control over what they watch, falling into a cyclical pattern of heavy viewing which fuels passivity further. Such a possibility suggests the popular assumption that people can become "hooked" or "addicted" to television.

So, although we have hypothesized that heavy viewers may turn to television because of some dissatisfaction with the more commonplace experiences of their daily lives, TV does not appear to substitute for actual involvement. In which activities, then, do heavier viewers report the most positive mood states?

First, in "public leisure activities" such as going to parties and playing sports, heavier viewers reported "concentrating" a great deal more than light viewers ($r = .29$, $p < .01$) and felt more "challenged" ($r = .40$, $p < .01$), "strong" ($r = .34$, $p < .01$), and "satisfied" ($r = .30$, $p < .01$). Secondly, when heavy viewers were unoccupied and idling, they reported feeling more "active" ($r = .29$, $p < .01$), "creative" ($r = .22$, $p < .05$), and "satisfied" ($r = .21$, $p < .05$). Third and finally, during "self-care and personal main-

2. All significance tests were two-tailed.

tenance activities," such as getting dressed or grooming oneself, heavy viewers were more "challenged" ($r = .21$, $p < .05$) and felt more "trusting," "relaxed," "friendly," and less "bored" ($p < .10$).

What does all this mean? Based on previous research which has found that heavy viewers tend to lack "inner control" (Villani, 1975), "inner resources" (Glick & Levy, 1962), and that they wish for immediate gratification from TV; I have postulated that to some extent heavy viewers would also tend to require relatively clear and positive feedback about themselves to feel good. This type of more concrete stimuli needed for the validation of one's self can be found, perhaps most readily, in the very kinds of more immediate and obvious activities which heavy viewers find most pleasurable. In "self-care" activities such as gazing in the mirror or in "public leisure" activities such as playing sports and games, heavy viewers are more central to the action at hand, as if on television, and report experiencing more positive feelings. It is hypothesized, therefore, that in these pleasurable activities the "self" becomes either more visible or, while being idle and daydreaming, the self is lost in fantasy. Furthermore, there is some evidence from this research to suggest that heavy television viewers tend to be rather self-absorbed and narcissistic.

The heavy viewer's lack of "inner resources" and a proclivity to "adventurousness" can both be seen as either leading to heavier television use or heavy viewing can be seen as leading to these types of personality characterisitcs. The direction of cause is uncertain in the preliminary findings, but it is probably the case that heavy viewing is less a cause and more a symptom and that chronic dependence of TV reinforces an already existing personality disposition. However, many years of heavy use starting at an early age could, in my opinion, breed the type of personality I have discussed.

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Applications to the Elderly

In concluding, I wish to apply some of my findings to the television viewing habits of older people. In a paper presented to last year's meeting, I reviewed the literature on television and the elderly and argued that avid television watching could promote or reinforce isolation and passivity in some aged persons (Kubey, 1977). Based on the findings of researchers who claim that the violent content of TV causes heavy television users to be more fearful of crime and suspicious of others (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), I suggested that a vicious circle may operate wherein fearful old people stay at home more often (Goldsmith & Tomas, 1974), watch more television, and become even more fearful and isolated.

The research which I have presented to you today confirms that heavy viewers tend to feel more "hostile" and "suspicious" in many of their daily activities. Furthermore, the fact that most all subjects feel quite "trusting" and "unsuspicious" when actually viewing supports the claim that TV provides safe and nonthreatening companionship. It is known that elderly people who live alone tend to view less discriminately, using television for companionship and as a time-killer (Wenner, 1976). Of concern, then, is the degree to which some elderly persons become dependent on TV and use it in place of other activities which, if engaged in, would tend to reduce their isolation and feelings of uselessness. Furthermore, a number of researchers have found that elderly people who view a lot of TV tend to display more passivity in all facets of their lives (Schalinske, 1968). My research does not confirm or deny these findings, but it does indicate that TV watching in and of itself is a very passive activity, especially for heavier viewers such as many of the elderly.

In future research we need to determine to what degree the viewing habits of the elderly are a function of a person's type of residence, health status, and whether or not he lives alone (Wenner, 1976) and to what degree these habits are also related to the types of personality characteristics that I have outlined in this talk. Finally, we need to learn whether and how television viewing can influence the personality and behavior of elderly people. Researchers are therefore invited to address themselves to the problems of unraveling these difficult questions.

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